

[Sixty years is a long time]

1

Jane K. Seary, Field Worker [?] 3,5 [Copy 1?] 1938-9 Mass. Section I [11/26/38?] Living Lore The Irish Shoemaker of Lynn “ Sixty years is a long time ta have a cuttin' knife in your hand, but ya know, I'd like ta have one there still[. ?] [much as I like the time to be sittin' here readin' all the things I dint have time ta read then.] [] BAB: does this idea seem phoney to you? “ A lot of things happened in them years[. ?] often time I kinda imagine myself feelin' a piece of leather to see which part ta cut the toe or the shank from. A man thinks somehow while he's feelin' leather. There's somethin about it that makes a man curious about what's goin' on in the world and what the world and what the world is made of. Anyways, the kind a' men you used ta find in the shoe shops wuz always curious about everything under the sun. [??]

“And that kind a man is there yet today. All this talk about machinery makin' machines a man men has been overworked some. Leastways, most of a the best cutters still cuts by hand and a good share of 'em still have thoughts that whirl round in their heads as fast as the whirl of the noisy machines in the room.

“And there's been a lotta good things hatched from thoughts of the men in the shops. Them fellas that had a mechanical brain used ta invent new machines / ta make short cuts for themselves. And some a them same short cuts was wuz the thing that put 'em out a work later on.

2

[??] some - - sentences used else - where.

“But it din't put the show shoe worker of Lynn out a work as much as it did fellas in other lines a work, that is, it din't then. For till the time of the war, Lynn was the biggest shoe city in the world. Shucks, it was way wuz easy for a good shoe worker to get a job. If we list

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lost work in one shop, if we just din't like the way a boss would talk to us all we had ta do was pick up our kit and go downstairs to another shop—or maybe upstairs, for there wuz shops on all floors of them big buildings down on lower Washington St., and Broad St.

“ You Ya know them buildings often look, ta me today like they wuz gettin' ready ta tumble over. Not because they are not built right for there's not a brick outa any of them, far as I kin see.

“But I remember when the whir of machines on every floor made a real reason for them bein' there. Today a lotta of 'em are empty, and the men who stood at the bench are gone, and the machinery's been yanked out. The places look like a man's home just after a wake when the undertaker had took his chairs out, leavin' the home awful empty.

“For the shops wuz kinda like our homes, in the old days. We spent half the hours a the 24 hours of the day there leastways. When my children wuz little, I hardly ever say saw 'em, “ ‘ cept on Sunday, for I left for the shop, “ ‘ fore they get got out a bed in the mornin' and when I got home at night, they was under covers for the night.

3

[?]

“At noon and on Saturday afternoons, we'd stay there and either read or play cards.

“But as I said before, them days are gone and them shops are empty, and we old timers sit at home now with nothin' ta do but play cards, read, or think back at what happened. Many things that went on came come back little by little and fit together, like on of them picture puzzles.

4

“ I wuz born in Ireland, in County Cork, jest a year before the Civil War begun in America. My father came ta America before I wuz born for there wasn't wusn't much work in Ireland on account a the bad results a the potato crop failin' some years before. Start here “

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There wasn't much work in America either though, f fur there wuz war talk and that made business bad. I guess he musta been homesick too for he came back home, but he died when I way wuz thirteen months. “ When I wuz born, that made six of us children . when my oldest brother an sister get got up in their teens though, they came ta America and went ta Lynn ta live with my father's sister. They get got work in the shoe shops.

[“They wuz makin' shoes for southern niggers then. They wuz rough things. They wasn't even put together in pairs. The right was jest like the left. “Stead of bein' packed like today today , they wuz jest tied together with a string and dumped together in big boxes.?”] [?] “ I wuz seven years old when my mother brought [?] the rest a us that wasn't here, over ta America. We get got on a steamboat at Cork and thought we'd get ta Boston in about ten days. But half way across, the boat broke down and we hada get towed back ta Cork. We all lived on the boat in dry dock there for about a week while they wuz gettin' it fixed. This time we come straight ta New York fur there wuz no time ta stop at Boston.

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[“I remember askin' my mother fur a drink a water when we got ta New York. A big nigger brought it. [?]”

“ ‘Oh! Oh! Ma!’ I screamed. It wuz the first time I ever saw [tae?] nigger and I thought he wuz the devil.?”] “ It wuz in a vacation time, about five years after I come ta Lynn, that I first started ta work in the shop. We wuz livin' in a house belongin' ta Mr. Phelan— yes he wuz Irish, an a smart one, too, for he had got up ta the place where he owned some houses and he run a shoe shop. “I wuz out in the yard whittlin' at some wood fur I din't have much ta do with my time in them days.

“Want ta put that boy ta work? “ Mr. Phelan asked my mother. “ He took me right into the cuttin' room. In my day that wuz the white collar room in the shop, for often the boss, the bosses boss'es son and his relatives worked there. We usta go in through the front door, not the back door like all the other help. “ And the other workers wuz always jealous of the

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cutters. Thought we thought we wuz more'n them. " When there wuz any gangin' up ta do, like fur a union, we always ganged up with the stitchers, next to us, they wuz considered the most skilled. If ya don't have a good cutter and a good stitcher in the ships, ya can't make very good shoes.

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" When I went into the cuttin' room, I started at the beginnin'. First I learned how ta dink out pieces of waste leather for the trimmins. To dink out leather, ya have a piece a cast iron or " steel shaped like the pattern ya want ta make. Ya put this on the leather like ya put a cookie cutter on dough. Ya pound it then with a hammer. " I did the best work I could fur I wanted to ta be a journeyman cutter. The usual time ta get to be that wuz three years. So I made a bargain ta work fur a low pay during that time so I could learn. It was sorta like you wuz under contract. " I wuz goin' to keep my bargain all right but they din't deep they'rn. There come a slack time and the boss said to me ., "Sorry Jackie, but I guess you'll havta lay off for two three weeks. " . " Will my pay go on jest the same? " I asked him. " When he told me " no, " I said, 'that's not fair fur I been workin' fur low pay and I thought it would be regular. "

"Well,' said my boss,' I can't help that. You'll hafta lay off the same.'

"I was sore[.?] I wasn't a journeyman and won't wun't be for another three quarter years, so I could not couldn't expect to ta get a journeymen's journeyman's job in another shop. But I thought I'd try. " And by dang, I get got that job, and the pay that went with it. No # [run in?]

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" Well, the time come when the slack time in that other shop was over and they came after me to learn the rest a my trade.

"Oh, I guess not " I said.

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“ ‘ But you ain't finished your time learning your trade “. .” You see he wanted me for that extra year, because he was only payin' me learner's wages. [?]

“ ‘ I guess the man I'm cuttin' fur is satisfied, “ I told him thim . [‘ ?] ‘Leastways he'll he's givin' me journey-man's pay. “ # “ During the [60?] years I been in the Lynn shops, I guess I worked in mor'n [40?] shops. [??]

I was never outa work much. The seasons sorta joineed joined together in them days, and if a fella dept on his toes he could most always work all the year round. run in Sec. [9?] p 4-5

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“Cuttin' wuz always skilled work but 'specially so after tan shoes come in. “ A fella could be a dang good cutter fur black shoes but wun't be worth a durn cuttin' colored shoes. Most shops had ta keep the sign, ‘Colored Cutters Wanted’ on the shop door most a’ the time.

“Ya see, a cutter a’ tan leather din't have ta only know the leather so he could put the strong part in the part a the shoe that would need it most [?], but he had ta know how ta match the color exact. The two toes of a pair of shoes had ta look jest alike. An sometimes, there'd be three or four shades on the same piece a leather.

“Ya'd be surprised how many men can't put colors together the way they'd oughta. There's more color blind [people in the world than most folks ever stop ta think about.?)

“I was never outa work much. I looked ahead, ya see fur I had a family. When one factory got through makin' shoes fur say, the New England Trade, and wuz in fur a dull season, I would switch over to another shop that wuz beginning a season of makin' shoes for the New York , trade, the Western trade or the southern trade. The seasons sorta joined

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together in them days, and if a fella kept on has his toes he could most always work all the year round. [?] [?] used [on p 7?] ([From [1b?] - p. 3.?)

But none of us wanted the job of bein' a colored cutter, even though we got more pay fur it. It wuz less pay in the end fur it took too much outa ya.

The guys that went ta see their best girls in yella shoes long about twenty five years ago, din't have no idea how hard it wuz fur the fellas in the cuttin' room ta match the parts in them shoes perfect. It sure took good nerves and brains an' eye that wan't color blind ta do it.

Its a lot easier ta cut colored shoes today because the pieces a leather all comes one shade. That's cause it's tanned with chemicals. Usta be all vegetable tannin'. /That's what we called the old bark tannin'. [?] Some a the skins we cut had been in them tanner's vats fur weeks and had had beef blood rubbed [?] into the pores a the skin. If ya had gone ta see the tannery in my day ya mighta seen the skin a yong calf 'er goat all sewed together and floatin' aroun' in them vats like they wuz the dead body a the animals. Took time ta tan skins the old vegetable tannin' way. But it sure made good leather. We cutters could always tell the kinda skin we wuz cuttin jest from the feel a it. [(From 16 - P. 4-5?)

9

[x?]

"I remember once though, during the '80s, how it wuz a lot like it is today today , though not so long. Most a' the shops had 'No help wanted [?] on their doors. [?]

"That's an awful sign fur a worker ta read, 'No help wanted.'

10

[??]

"After that time (the 1880s), that is after the strikes about that time, the foreigners started ta get into the shops. [?] " I was never one to say they the ?] was a bad lot, but a lot a the fellas in the shop hated 'em. Ya see we was gettin' good pay and they'd work fa less money. It made it bad for all a us. " Another reason most hated 'em wa was because some a them fellas got in bad and we blamed the whole lot of 'em for what trouble two or three'd make. I remember one time when ————— a man got shot in the head. He was one a the owners a the shop I was cuttin' in then. It way wuz Saturday, near noon and we way ta get our week's pay. He wuz bringin' it from the bank. " Down Monroe St. came three foreign fellas and they shot him right through the head in front of the shop. We heard the shot. They grabbed the money and tried to make a getaway. " They captured them guys before night and shot one of 'em, while they way wuz gettin' taken. He way wuz dumped into the ['?] plice wagon and brought down to plice headquarters. I remember how they yanked him outa the wagon feet first and his head bumped the street. But he couldn't feel it cause he was as dead as a door knob. Died on the way ta headquarters. " That whole business din't make Lynn feel any too good towards foreigners. They wasn't trusted and folks was afraid of 'em.

The strikes brought in a [? people?] lotta folks from the provinces — Canada — and a lot from down Maine. Later the Greeks come, and the Italians, the Germans, the Polish and a lotta others. When I first went in, there was jest Yankees and Irish and Irish-Americans. Today the shops has all kinds a people workin' in 'em.

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" But they get got in the shops just the same and every year more'n more squeezed in, startin' at the jobs the rest of us din't want and workin' themselves up. There wasn't many that get got in the cuttin room though, and they din't get in the welters union for aa good while. " It was a good while later 'fore the Jews get got in. That was in the 1900s. Most always they started in the junk business and after a while they picked up scrap leather an sold it. They got in the business that way and after a while started their own shops. " Ya

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hear a lot about how they are crooked, and I guess some of 'em are. But there's honest Jews same as any other class a people. " I remember when one Jew shop I was cuttin' in closed down because the mortgage way wuz foreclosed. " Most of the workers put in a legal claim for their last week's pay no sooner'n they left the shop. Advised me ta do the same. " But I thought I'd give that Jew a chance. He'd always treated me fair, far as I could see. Well, I wasn't wrong for when the next Saturday come, sure, my pay come. I didn't lose nothin' by trustin' him. " Course they did kinda tear up the business in Lynn, but I don't think it was all their fault. There's a lotta things entered inta that, and a lotta times the unions wanted ta eat their cake and have it too.

12

[??-???

[“?]And the Jew, ya see, is a shrewd creature. And he's no hypocrite. If he don't believe in that 'love your neighbor business (he comes right out and says so and he acts upon it. He believes in getting all he can an he thinks the other fella is a fool if he don't work for the same thing. " Sometimes I think he ain't so fur wrong. Now you take a mother and a father. It ain't natural fur them ta love the kids down the street like they love their own. That's the way a jew thinks and he acts on it.

“Ya can just bet he'll help his own. We'd all be a lot better off if we quit hollerin' about them, and way wuz as charitable towards our own as they are. They got their good points same as any other class of people. “And its the same way with religion as it is with races. A man's likely to be all his life what he's born inta. All creed's get creeds' got good points and all the best ones are durn hard to live up ta. It ain't the religion that's wrong with a man as much as its his not living up ta it. “ Now the Masons, for instance, if I'd a been born somewhere else, stead of Ireland. I'd probably be a Mason, or at least a Protestant a some kind.

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"A good Mason is a good fella. And, fur as I kin see that lodge don't want none but the best. I remember someone asked me one time about a fella that wanted to join. I told him I din't know nothin' wrong with him. [?]

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[?]

"Is he a Catholic? " they asked me.

"I told them I din't know and I didn't. I never saw him go to Mass.

"Is his wife and child Catholics? " they asked me.

"They wuz and good ones too fur I know they never missed Mass and they lived up ta their religion in other ways too. So I said, 'Yes, they are.'

"Well, da ya know, that fellow never get got in, and I heard afterwards that a Mason said the reason wuz,' we don't /cap have a lodge ta break up families.' /

14

[?]

"Yes, I believe in churches. The world needs 'em. And the Catholic Church is a good church and it does a powerful lot of good. It ought ta. It's the strongest organization in the world. And it claims it's right and the other churches are wrong.

"But as fur me, I think there's so dang much that none of us know about religion. It's the most mysterious thing on earth.

"Take this death that is sure comin' to us all some day. The nearer I get ta it, the more I think that none a us knows very much about what's comin'. We might kid ourselves to

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thinkin' we know, but we don't. There's sometimes I think that when we die, we're dead, eh?

"Anyway, it seems ta me that God thinks as much a the animals as he does a us. The sparrow fur instance. He give us reason but he give them instinct. Each shows us how ta take care of ourself.

"The only difference is that the sparrow sometimes uses his instinct better'n we use our reason.

"Offen times I think that man thinks too much of hisself. He's a pretty egotistical creature ta figure that God thinks sa much more a him than he does the wild creatures. Ya know the Bible says that God cares when a sparrow falls. Well, I believe he does jest as much as he cares when we die.

15

[?]

Aunt Mary presented a no less broad religious view.

"The way I look at it is that there's many roads ta heaven. I'm on one, or so I think. A Protestant is on another and a Jew's on another. [We8ll?] We'll all get there if we stay on our own road and travel it like we oughta. It's when we kick up our heels and block the road we're on so that the others get discouraged and turn back, that we're sinnin'. A person that does as many good deeds along the way as she can, 'ain't so far wrong.

"Its these pie pious ones that does the harm. They can't see no good in any religion but their own and they take up so much time in prayin' that they ?ain't ain't got time to be human and kind and decent. Look out fer the pie pious ones, I don't care what church they belong ta. Theyr'e dangerous. Stay away from them. " The talk drifted toward the Catholic Church "sisters."

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“They do a wonderful work and no one could ever say diffrent. But there's one work greater. That is ta be a good mother. That's God's chosen work fur a woman. Nothin' comes above that. Ta bring up your children to be useful and good. Nothin' is greater'n that, its what makes a good world after we're gone. It kinda makes a woman live after she's dead; at least what she teaches her children lives on. And then they pass it on to theirs.”